

THE PANEL METHOD OF CONDUCTING DISCUSSION

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Increasingly in our civilization there is need for cooperative thinking, planning and acting. The panel discussion affords opportunity for experience in cooperative techniques. Moreover, the discussion itself is very stimulating to understanding, creative thinking, sympathy and other desirable outcomes. Panel discussions, properly guided, furnish a form of vital and enjoyable activity which at the same time is richly educative.

The elements of a panel are four: a chairman; a panel of four to eight persons; an audience; a topic for discussion.

The entire panel is seated in a semi-circle facing the audience, the chairman in the center. No speeches are made, but a free-for-all discussion takes place between the members of the panel exactly as though no audience were present. The chairman coordinates and interprets this discussion, attempting to weave the separate strands and items of thought into a complete design in which each finds its place. There must be NO formal debate, NO tense conflicts; instead the spirit which dominates the discussion is that any and every view is a contribution and has a place in the completed pattern. The activity of bringing unity out of the diversity of ideas and viewpoints is the peculiar function of the chairman; the function of the individual members is to supply creatively the diversity of ideas and elements. When the general pattern of the discussion is clearly seen, opportunity is given for the entire audience to contribute. Finally, the chairman summarizes the discussion and indicates the general benefits accruing from the discussion activities.

Chairman:

The most important factor in the success of a panel discussion is the chairman. He must have "hospitality of mind" to a very high degree and resourcefulness in selecting, harmonizing and combining different points of view. He must be a good judge with a background of broad culture to enable him to quickly seize upon the valuable element of each offering. He offers very few ideas himself, confining his contributions to emphasizing significant elements and to the weaving and organizing process. In the final summary, he has the opportunity to integrate the products of the discussion into a worthwhile whole.

Members:

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Panel members should be ready thinkers, facile speakers, interested in topic, and representatives of a wide variety of viewpoints and interests. Above all, they must be cooperative in attitude.

The topic chosen for discussion should be one about which conflicting or different views are held by members of the panel. It should be specific in that it deals with a narrow, single topic but it should be general in its form of statement.

Preliminary Meeting:

Ordinarily, the first step in the discussion is a preparatory meeting of chairman and panel before the discussion, that the chairman may get acquainted with the panel, may acquaint them with one another, and may make them familiar with the conditions of the discussion. The chairman asks each member to give a brief biographical account of himself.

The chairman should emphasize the fact that no one is to stand, or to make a speech, but to think creatively, and to contribute. He should emphasize both the undesirability of personal opposition to another's contribution, and the need to entertain any thought or viewpoint, however irrelevant it may at first thought appear. He should also emphasize the importance of each individual's contributing with perfect freedom every aspect of his own personal thinking and viewpoint. He should also make clear that the spirit of friendship and good will should be consciously and systematically maintained without in any way limiting freedom of thought and expression.

Discussion before Audience:

The second step is the explanation to the audience of the method of conducting the discussion. This explanation should repeat the instructions to the panel and make it clear that the panel is serving as the mouthpiece of the group because an informal discussion is too cumbersome in a large audience. The audience is asked to listen only until the general pattern of ideas is established and the promise should be made that ultimately the discussion will be thrown open for all. The chairman should stand while making this explanation and should emphasize the fact that speeches are taboo. He should conclude by clearly stating the problem for discussion, and then sit down and begin the discussion.

The third step is to call upon some panel member for the expression of an opinion on a particular issue. The chairman should listen thoughtfully to the ideas expressed, mentally select the essential elements of the contribution, restate them in slightly different words, and ask some other panel member what he thinks about the matter. In this way the discussion continues and contributions from the panel members soon become spontaneous.

Specific Duties of Chairman:

- A. To stimulate contributions;
- B. To repeat or reformulate contributions enough to give the audience and panel time to rethink for themselves the point made;

- C. To supply illustrations when a panel member states a principle, or to generalize when a panel member gives specific illustrations. This also provides time and opportunity for understanding;
- D. To give recognition by name, systematically but subtly, for each contribution made;
- E. To emphasize aspects of contributions significant for the pattern or design which develops. The chairman may guide by asking questions and by emphasis, but should not dominate or direct the discussion to a specific and pre-determined outcome;
- F. To interpret the interrelations of diverse contributions both to each other and to the general pattern;
- G. To summarize and to integrate from time to time, and at the close of the discussion;
- H. To decide when the contributions of the panel have been sufficiently brought out to include the audience in the discussion.

Conflicts:

One peculiar and important function of the chairman is to prevent emotional clashes and tensions. The best means of doing this is the interjection of humorous or whimsical comments immediately following the slightest indication of opposition or tension. The interruption gives time for the members involved to regain rational control, and the laughs that follow humorous comments automatically aid relaxation. On the other hand, the chairman must exhibit the utmost toleration for conflicting ideas and have a genuine interest in each point of view presented. Members should be encouraged to contribute conflicting points of view but not to assume an antagonistic or argumentative attitude.

Control of Audience:

Another important function is the control of obstreperous individuals who disregard the conditions under which the discussion is being conducted, and egotistically and aggressively insist on making speeches. Here again, humorous interruption and the passing of the question to a panel member is an effective means.

Outcome:

In general, the chairman is to build bridges from mind to mind and out of aggressive, creative, atomic thinking to manufacture by emphasis and redirection a rich, comprehensive and consistent view of the whole topic, with each element in its proper place and relationship. Sometimes it is sufficient if opposing views and reasons are brought to light and arrayed in opposition. It is not essential to success in this type of discussion that a decision be reached. The goal is the clarification of thought.

Chairman's Preparation:

The chairman, in preparation for his task, needs to canvass as completely as possible all sides and viewpoints with respect to the topic. He must attempt to foresee every contribution that will be made and to plan how he will utilize it in the development of his final design. He must have a plan and a goal, yet he must not dominate or control but accept what comes. He may, however, stimulate the expression of the ideas he desires by shunting questions to individual panel members whose viewpoints are likely to lead them to respond as desired. A successful preparation insures that no surprises will come out during the discussion, and no serious deficiencies will exist at the end of the discussion. The chairman, however, needs to exercise great restraint not to force the discussion along the lines of his own thinking.

This information concerning the panel method of conducting discussion has been made available to the American Association of University Women through the courtesy of the Hamtramck Public Schools.